

■ THE SOMMELIER JOURNAL

APRIL/MAY 2016
\$10.00 US/\$12.00 CANADA

THE SOMM JOURNAL

the *Judgment of* *Paris*

40 YEARS LATER

THE EVENT THAT CHANGED WINE FOREVER

They'll always have Paris
(left to right): George Taber,
who wrote the original story
in Time magazine and later
authored the book *Judgment*
of Paris; international wine
critic and original *Judgment*
of Paris organizer Steven
Spurrier; Bo Barrett, CEO
and Master Winemaker,
Chateau Montelena; and Ted
Baseler, President and CEO,
Ste. Michelle Wine Estates
& Stag's Leap Wine Cellars.



THE SOMMELIER AS WINEMAKER

AT RAYMOND VINEYARDS, SOMMELIERS COMPETE TO CREATE THIS
YEAR'S "SOMMELIER SELECTION" BLEND

BY JONATHAN CRISTALDI

photos by Alexander Rubin



The team of sommeliers chosen to create the Raymond Sommelier Selection (identified in individual photos, pages 46-47) with Jean-Charles Boisset, proprietor of Boisset Collection/Raymond Vineyards (far right) and Director of Winemaking Stephanie Putnam and Assistant Winemaker Thane Knutson (far left).

The somms pose for a group photo on the grounds of Raymond Vineyards.



Some things are best tackled by a team of experts. On February 2, proprietor Jean-Charles Boisset hosted a group of esteemed sommeliers—many of them Advanced Sommeliers from highly lauded establishments all around the country—for the seventh annual Sommelier Selection blending experience at Napa Valley's Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena.

In exchange for their services in helping create the next Raymond Sommelier Selection blend, Boisset provided unique educational opportunities for the hosted somms, encouraging them to taste many of the wines within the Boisset Collection, to visit Boisset's extremely rare and unique historical properties throughout wine country and to learn more about the process of blending.

The Winemaker and Her Team

Typically, the blending of wine for distribution and sale to consumers is reserved for a highly skilled team of winemaking elite at Raymond Vineyards. And Jean-Charles Boisset, or "JCB," as he is commonly known, has employed the best. Director of Winemaking, Stephanie Putnam, is Boisset's secret weapon, hired just after Boisset purchased Raymond in 2009.

Putnam is all personality, with a commanding presence. She grew up in the Bay Area with a wine-centric family. As a child, she would color-coordinate her grape juice to the wine her parents drank at the dinner table and even had her own Baccarat crystal decanter—quite a coincidence given JCB's partnership with the brand and his affinity for Baccarat's iconic chandeliers.

I asked Putnam if, for all of JCB's improvements, there was anything that we—the consumers, trade and critics—are missing? She emphasized that a lot of attention is paid to the front-of-house experiences, but added, "We've been working equally hard behind the scenes, and it's not just a renaissance of Raymond in terms of the experiences, it's also one in terms of the wine styles." Some of the ways in which they've set out to achieve their goals, Putnam explained, is by phasing out the use of American oak, while focusing on extreme berry sorting, extended macerations, smaller fermentations and leaving their wines unfiltered.

Still, for all of Putnam and her team's experience, the blending team she was to work with on February 2 was not the Raymond winemakers she has at her disposal—Associate Winemaker Kathy George

or Assistant Winemaker Thane Knutson—nor their District Collection, Generations and JCB wines consultant, Philippe Melka, but rather a group of highly regarded sommeliers from around the U.S.

Their task? To craft the next Raymond Sommelier Selection blend, from the 2014 vintage.

The Sommelier Selection

In the center of the ceiling of the Blending Room at Raymond Vineyards is a disco ball, which bounces particles of light off the stainless steel surfaces illuminated by ultraviolet blacklights, making it easy to forget you are in a working winery. The sommeliers had teamed up in groups of two, five groups in all, and were seated at their stations, outfitted in futuristic laboratory coats like something out of *The Twilight Zone*. Dance music underscored Putnam, as she explained the rules of the blending session.

From the five 2014 barrel samples in front of them, each team would have about 45 minutes to come up with a winning blend. They were given a Napa, Sonoma and Lake County Cabernet Sauvignon and a Napa and Sonoma Merlot. Putnam would supervise the process, answering questions as they

arose, and before she turned them loose, emphasized the importance of accuracy in adding up to 100 milliliters. "There's always a team that has a final blend of 110 percent or 90 percent," and while everyone laughed, her predictions would prove prescient by the end.

The Finale

Full from a three-course lunch, back in their lab coats and seats, one-by-one, the somms gave their earnest thoughts about their own final blends—talk of balance, structure, core strength and finesse. It was hard to believe, some said, that the finished blends came from the same base wines. But above all, each would be proud to serve any of the final blends in their respective restaurants.

Then, Jean-Charles Boisset gave his impressions. "The wines have an amazing base," he said, continuing to punctuate each word with more effort than the last. "Every

one has *power, legs and energy*—and every one of your personalities is showing in every single blend here. I'm so grateful to all of you for being here and I've voted 100 for each of you!" he exalted.

And while JCB may have pronounced everyone a winner, it would be Putnam who, donning the winemaker cap, announced the results all had been anticipating. "There are no losers here," said Putnam, adding a resounding, "but..." to much laughter.

In the end, the final blend was announced to rounds of applause and cheering. (As Putnam had predicted there would be one blend that over-achieved—clocking in at an impossible 110 percent out of 100.) Although one team's blend had edged out the others, all of the sommelier's decided together on what the winning creation would be as the Raymond Sommelier Selection is always considered a collaborative effort of *all* the sommeliers as a group,

with each somm contributing equally to the project.

As the excitement and applause wound down, Todd Lipman, Head Sommelier of Boston's Bistro du Midi, remarked, "As sommeliers, we taste a lot of wine. However, we don't usually take those wines and try to come up with something that is greater than the sum of their parts. And although this exercise may have only involved five base wines—it called upon years and years of experience in tasting."

After the blending session, Jean-Charles Boisset shared a bottle of the highly allocated 2012 Chablis Premier Cru "Vaillons" from J. Moreau & Fils, part of the Boisset Collection of French wineries, in a celebratory toast dedicated to the sommeliers' collaborative and creative spirit and energy that brought everyone together from across all regions of the country for this once-in-a-lifetime experience.



The Teams and Their Approach



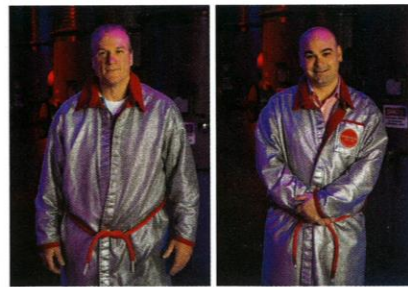
Yannick Benjamin,
Sommelier, University
Club, New York City, NY.

Nico Snyman,
Sommelier and
Assistant Manager,
Joël Robuchon, Las
Vegas, NV.



Danielle Kuzinich,
GM, The Hidden
Vine Wine Bar, San
Francisco, CA.

Ashley Ceraolo, Buyer,
California Pizza Kitchen,
Los Angeles, CA.



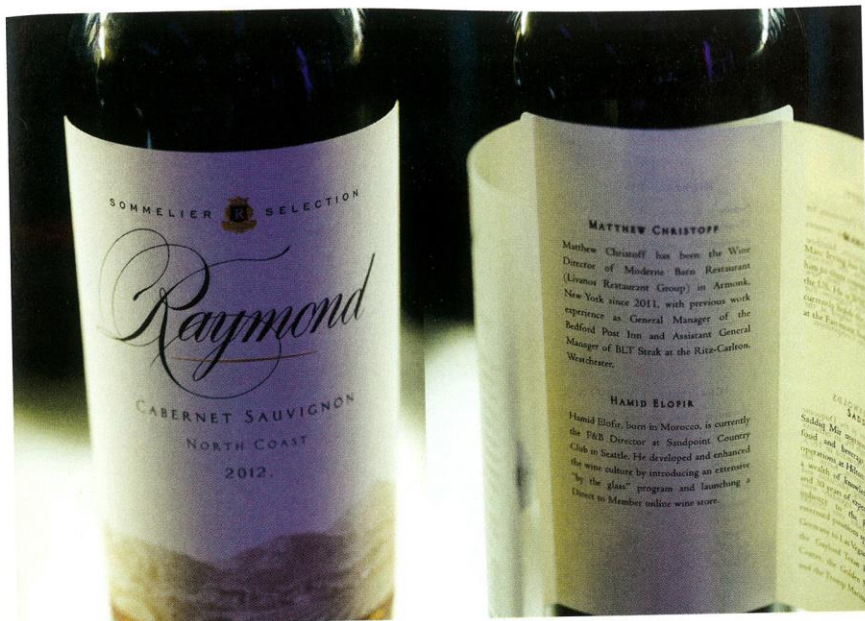
Todd Rushing, CEO,
Concentrics Restaurant
Group, Atlanta, GA.

Gregory Mayer,
Wine Director, Bern's
Steakhouse, Tampa, FL.

Both Benjamin and Snyman are working towards their MS, so there was a level of trust in their interaction and in their balance perceptions. "We went through five wines originally and wrote down key factors, trying to create a whole donut," remarked Benjamin. Snyman pointed to a barrel sample and said it was the ring of the donut, "with a lot of oak—and then we filled the hole with the Sonoma and Napa Cab," which "has the most noblesse, intensity and power. The final challenge was to find the right "icing," said Snyman.

Ceraolo had previously blended with clonal selections of the same grape, while Kuzinich had also participated in blending. "We're trying to make a complex wine with balance," said Ceraolo. "We are working on balancing fruitiness with tannins in our blend," said Kuzinich.

"With the Napa fruit as our backbone we were looking for the right combination to round out our blend. The Sonoma Cab gives us that round character that has nice edges, and the Lake County offers more fruit," said Rushing.



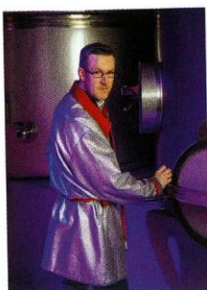
The back label of the Raymond "Sommelier Selection" wines includes a fold-out detailing the bios of the somms who attended that year's Blending Session.



Noel Petrin, VP Operations, Cru Food & Wine Bar, Dallas, TX.



Todd Lipman, Head Sommelier, Bistro du Midi, Boston, MA.



Jeffrey Mayfield, Wine Director, Del Frisco's Steakhouse, Philadelphia, PA.



Jamie Harding, Wine Director, Cavallo Point, Sausalito, CA.

Both Petrin and Lipman had blended before, but "not professionally," joked Lipman. "We tasted all the components, took notes and tasted the finished product from two years ago as a benchmark," explained Petrin. Their approach was to each create an initial blend and compare and tweak those blends until one emerged as a winner.

"We took rudimentary tasting notes and just dove in," said Harding, who added, "I'd like to see a little more 'stuffing' than the 2012." His blending partner, Mayfield, said, "We want to maintain the integrity of past blends—a well-balanced, thoughtful wine that isn't over the top in any one direction and appeals to a broad spectrum of guests." Mayfield has served both the 2011 and 2012 Sommelier Selection wines at his restaurant.

A Visit to BUENA VISTA WINERY

After the blending session, the sommeliers were taken to Buena Vista Winery to witness Buena Vista Winery's Historic Wine Tool Museum and Show. "Buena Vista struck me personally for the fact that JCB has taken such care in preserving what should be to all wine lovers an iconic winery with an amazingly rich history," said Jeffrey Mayfield, Wine Director of Philadelphia's Del Frisco's Steakhouse. "As a self-proclaimed wine geek, you think you know how it's made now, but to get a chance to see how things were done centuries ago proves it was not only a labor of love but a labor of survival and innovation."



Buena Vista Winery is also known for its reincarnated founding ambassador, Agoston Haraszthy, the self-proclaimed Count of Buena Vista who was brought back to life in 2011 by Jean-Charles Boisset and is now portrayed by Sonoma historian George Webber. The Count founded Buena Vista, California's first premium winery in 1857, and he is commonly referred to as "The Father of California Viticulture" as he was known for being the first in California to advise hill planting, dry farming, planting grapevines closer together to stress the vines and reduce yield, and "green harvest" or dropping fruit. He was also the first to use redwood for fermentation and aging, and instituted many more European viticultural techniques to improve the quality of the wines being made in California.